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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 KABUL 002310

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [AF](#)
SUBJECT: PARTIES MUM FOR NOW ON PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES

REF: A. KABUL 2128
[1](#)B. KABUL 1812

Classified By: Political Counselor Alan Yu for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

[1](#)1. (C/NF) SUMMARY. Political maneuverings for next year's presidential elections are well underway, but most of the major political parties are holding their cards close and have told us they are unlikely to publicly commit to a candidate for some time. Although President Karzai declared his intention to run for re-election last week and a handful of minor candidates have made similar announcements, major parties have withheld endorsements. Like bicyclists racing in a peloton at the front of a road race, Afghanistan's leading political groups are holding back, watching the movements of their opponents and possible partners to see who will be the first to break away with a dominant show of strength. Perhaps only after one candidate makes a convincing move to be the leader of the pack will most political parties react and move to keep pace.

Early Signs of Networking

[1](#)2. (C/NF) Representatives of the United Front, Hezb-e-Islami, and other political groups tell us they have already been contacted by several Afghans seeking endorsements for possible campaigns for the presidency. Leaders of most parties, which tend to be personality-driven coalitions of convenience and not tied to ideological positions, say they are willing to talk to anyone. Endorsements, though, will have to wait until later in the campaign season. According to many politicians, President Karzai has lost support as he has taken heavy criticism for the deteriorating security situation and unfulfilled promises to support various ethnic groups. However, no other candidate has yet to emerge with the credibility, multi-ethnic appeal, name-recognition, and financial resources to gain a clear edge. According to leaders of these main political groups, among those making the solicitations for support already are President Karzai himself, former Interior Minister Ali Ahmad Jalali, and Mustafa Zahir, grandson of the late King Zahir Shah.

United Front Feeling Confident

¶3. (C/NF) Members of the United Front opposition coalition tell us they are confident about their chances of winning next year's presidential election, even though they have yet to select a candidate. Members of the United Front's executive committee say they have received buy-in from most or all of the coalition's component power bases to run a single candidate. A United Front spokesman said this week a candidate may be made public in as soon as two weeks, but executive committee members have told us the coalition's leadership will reveal nominees for president and two vice presidents some time after the US presidential election. The executive committee also hopes to hold a party convention before next year, at which time provincial- and district-level United Front members would ratify the executive committee's chosen candidate.

¶4. (C/NF) Kabul-based leaders of the majority-Uzbek party Junbesh, an occasional United Front partner, say they are committed to supporting the Front's candidate, whoever it may be. Junbesh leaders say they have ruled out supporting Karzai and believe the 10 percent won by Gen. Dostum, the party's most influential leader, in the 2004 election will put a United Front candidate over the top. Dostum himself reportedly believes a United Front victory is his strongest path back to legitimacy and a meaningful role in an Afghan government. However, at least one Junbesh member from Nangarhar said Dostum was also reaching out to Karzai, promising votes in exchange for greater freedom.

¶5. (C/NF) United Front executive committee member Mohammad Sediq Chakari, a Tajik with close connections to Jamiat and

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United Front leader Burhanuddin Rabbani, said the coalition will run a Pashtun candidate for president, Tajik for first vice president, and Hazara for second vice president (this matches Karzai's own current slate). Chakari said Uzbeks would be compensated for being left off the slate with a number of high-level Cabinet positions. A Pashtun at the top of the ticket might ordinarily scare off Tajik voters, but many see the strategy as a pragmatic course to achieve a more decentralized government. In several conversations we have had with key members, the United Front's agenda for leading the government typically includes constitutional reform resulting in a largely ceremonial Pashtun president, a more powerful (and usually Tajik) prime minister, and the popular election of governors.

¶6. (C/NF) If the major egos in the United Front -- Rabbani, Dostum, Lower House Speaker and 2004 runner-up Yunus Qanooni, former Herat governor Ismail Khan, Mustafa Zahir, etc. -- can remain united, Chakari believes they will bring 6 million votes to the coalition's candidate, a convincing victory if turnout matches the 8-9 million ballots cast in ¶2004. For the time being, most, but not all, United Front leaders appear to be behind this strategy. Dostum and Qanooni have publicly reached out to their fellow coalition partners and offered support on minor political issues, but Zahir occasionally appears to pursue his own agenda in regards to a presidential campaign and Rabbani told us just three weeks ago he still expects a Jamiat-backed Tajik to run in the election (ref A). The United Front has at times courted Upper House Speaker Sebghatulla Mojaddedi (Kabul, Tajik) and Hezb-e-Wahdat faction leader and Lower House MP Mohammad Mohaqqueq (Kabul, Hazara) to join their efforts, but United Front sources say those two are likely to run themselves, attracting minor support they can trade in for political clout and government positions if the election goes to a second round.

¶7. (C/NF) Despite the United Front's strategy and apparent unity, executive committee members confess they have yet to identify the right candidate. According to Chakari and other sources, the coalition has ruled out supporting Karzai, who Chakari said reached out to the United Front earlier this month in an effort to gain their backing or at least convince

them to run a marginal candidate. The United Front briefly considered Karzai's request, then rejected it, he said, sensing an opportunity to take advantage of what they see as the president's declining support among Pashtuns.

Hezb-e-Islami as Kingmaker

¶8. (C/NF) While the United Front launches its search for a winning presidential slate, Hezb-e-Islami Afghanistan (HIA) leaders say they are holding back for now, entertaining solicitations for support from a myriad of candidates but making no commitments. Although they have not been as active as the United Front in aggressively courting a candidate, HIA leaders are equally confident that their party will provide the decisive edge for the eventual winner of the election. HIA Chairman Arghandewal said he has taken calls from many potential candidates, including President Karzai, but said the party will not endorse before December.

¶9. (C/NF) Arghandewal said HIA likely will not run its own candidate. Party leaders sense their influence in Afghan politics is on the rise and do not want to lose their momentum by running a candidate who falls just short of victory. Instead, Arghandewal said they will wait to see which candidate gains a convincing edge and, assuming that candidate wants the support of HIA's supposed 2 million members, pledge their support to him. Arghandewal, who also is a tribal affairs advisor to Karzai, has not ruled out throwing his party's votes behind the president and suggests Karzai's only path to victory may be by courting HIA's predominately Pashtun membership to counter the Tajik-dominated United Front.

¶10. (C/NF) At HIA's July conference, party leaders said they

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were eager to expand their influence by running a large number of candidates in the 2010 parliamentary elections (ref B). If HIA expects to compete in non-Pashtun areas, it will have to be careful about becoming associated with a Pashtun nationalist presidential candidate. Given these concerns, Arghandewal said the party will wait to see who emerges as a strong candidate before making any commitments that could jeopardize its long-term prospects.

Gailani Family May Run Patriarch as Figurehead

¶11. (C/NF) Other political groupings have been active behind the scenes as well. Upper House First Deputy Speaker Hamed Sayed Gailani has been networking with his Harmony Group, a collection of 30-40 MPs in the Upper House usually loyal to President Karzai, to measure support for his father, Pir Sayed Ahmad Gailani, a moderate mujahideen leader with considerable political and religious clout. Although Pir Gailani is in poor health, Hamed Gailani reportedly seeks to use his father's good reputation as a means for the numerous younger Gailani family politicians to lead the government. The Gailani family's success would be contingent on Karzai's continued problems among voters in the south, east, and Kabul.

"We Don't Care Who Wins, We Just Don't Want to be on the Losing Team"

¶12. (C/NF) One year out from the 2009 election, only a few candidates have officially thrown their hats into the ring. But nearly everyone has begun gaming likely scenarios and testing support. Political parties here are motivated more by promises of powerful positions and influence than ideological stands on issues. The overriding concern for many party leaders is "we don't want to pick a loser." The desire to be on the winning team leaves most political blocs staying silent for now, waiting for the right candidate to come along.

¶13. (C/NF) Two major factors in determining who will be the first to gain traction are how united can the United Front remain and to what extent alienated Pashtun voters will not vote for President Karzai (or not vote at all). If the United Front's leaders remain committed to one candidate and a depressed Pashtun vote splinters among multiple candidates, they may very well pull out a victory. However, if Karzai or another Pashtun successfully combines support from HIA and other Pashtun parties, while one or more of the United Front's leading egos decides to go his own way, the president or another strong Pashtun candidate could cobble together enough support from various factions putting their votes up for sale to eek out a likely second-round win.

WOOD